

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

O.H 102

HELEN DENGLER

Interviewed by

Patricia Young

April 10, 1980

INTERVIEWEE: HELEN DENGLER

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 10 April 1980

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

Y: This is an interview with Mrs. Dengler at the White Sun Guest Ranch in Rancho Mirage for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on Thursday, April 10, 1980, at four o'clock in the afternoon.

D: Situation for many years and it all goes together. And you realize that you have to know about what you're talking. So I did a lot of digging. I interviewed a lot of oldtimers who are long since gone, not tapes but, you know, I'd phone them or I'd go to see them. Like Don Cameron and so on and so forth. And then there are always so many misconceptions and you have the new self and it's exciting and you become automatically enthused and excited about this thing, and you just want to keep the record straight. So I'm all for it. I think it's

great what you're doing.

Y: Why don't we start talking about the White Sun Guest Ranch, perhaps what was here before you started the guest ranch.

D: Well, there was a Colonel Haner here and his wife. He was retired army and had poor health and of all the places in the world to go, this had been recommended that so many people had come to the desert for health reasons. And he really was the one who had the idea for a guest ranch originally, but he was not able to follow through on it. I don't think he had the funds or the health and so on. He had a charming wife and daughter. And we had come from the east coast, my husband was a New Yorker. And we had some property there and had moved out to Los Angeles. And become very close with California. And, of course, we wanted to get rid of our eastern property on Long Island Sound. This was the Rye, New York, Greenwich area, so we were trading around for income property out here. And then we made a deal on some apartments on Crenshaw Boulevard. This was during the outbreak, well, just before Pearl Harbor this was. We moved down in 1941. So Jack, who was in the aircraft industry during the war, he decided that after the war

probably Los Angeles would go downhill. It was just be a wartime boom or something, you know, and why not get rid of this property in L. A. on Crenshaw Boulevard and find something else. And I don't know, he was looking, I guess, for some kind of a ranch and we were looking in the Hemet area. We had three little children. And so he went around and he found various places and he came over the hill from Hemet where he had found something he sort of liked. And I don't know, I guess he ran into Tony Burke. Is he still alive? Have you interviewed him?

Y: I haven't had a chance to interview him, but I have talked to him.

D: Oh, well, he's a mine, gold mine (laughter). He's been her long before all of us. Don't miss him. Anyhow, Tony Burke was an up and coming real estate agent and I guess he brought Jack out here and introduced him to the Haners who wanted to sell this property. And they, like so many desert people in those days, this was 1946, right after the war, were most warm and cordial. And I said, well, you can't get any idea about this place unless you stay here at least for a night or two, you know. Imagine selling property like that. So he spent the night with them and they had little irrigation ditches around all

up the oleander hedges and there were a jillion tamarsk trees. It was just a jungle, whole place, and sort of all falling apart buildings. There wasn't very much that was of a great value at that time. The main lodge, part of that was here. Very small part. And, of course, he was enchanted with these people. And the whole feeling of desert hospitality, which is one of its greatest appeals, I think. And he came, we were living up in Santa Barbara then in 1946. Came rushing home with all this talk about the California desert. Well, I'm a Madison, Wisconsin person and I like green hills and lush trees and all that sort of thing. And I really thought he was out of his head, you know. Completely gone. And you're involved with small children. Jack, I don't know what you're talking about. Oh, he said, well, you'll just be crazy about this place. (laughter) Oh, and he had a pair of boots, cowboy boots, and that was the end, marching around. So we drove the long hot journey all the way down here to the desert, and it was, what, two hundred miles from Santa Barbara, I guess. And sand and everything, wind blowing, and oh, it was just repulsive to me. I just couldn't imagine anything worse. I couldn't see any possibilities whatsoever.

But he's the kind of a person who can see into the future, always has been, and you know, I'm barely here. I barely come out of the past to catch up with the present. (laughter) So, to make a very long story short, he decided to buy the property and develop it and make it into a guest ranch. Then I said, fine, you just go right ahead, but I'm going to stay in Santa Barbara and we had the family to raise. And they have to go to school, it's a God forsaken, this, that and the other, it's no place for children. And I was less than enthusiastic. So he did. And he started singlehandedly building it. And he started on the bunkhouse. I'll walk around. It's kind of hot right now to see it. Have you been around the whole thing? Well, I'll walk you around later. He started it, I think, with the bunkhouse. And he would commute on weekends all the way down here and work his head off. And then, of course, after the war you couldn't get anything in the way of supplies. Everything had been commandeered for the war effort and, you see, he could get matching faucets for a sink that was unbelievable. Everything was mismatched, so on and so forth. And then he finally found, people would sort of drift in onto the road. And if I paint

this wall, could I spend the night or something like that. I mean, things just happened in a most unorganized manner. And there was a pioneer spirit here, of course, that was very contagious. I guess that's been true through the whole history of the country, and people just get carried away with it. I mean, the future was limitless. There was just no end and, oh, weather was marvelous. Everything was just great. So we finally hired a Manchurian couple and they didn't know anything about the business, but they were full of enthusiasm. And, well, you know, you just put every nickel you have into it, and it's never enough. And it limps along and limps along and we were still living in Santa Barbara up there. And then we went through a series of three or four managers, I think, and they got worse and worse. And they robbed us blind and, you know, not living on a place. Oh, it was bad news. I think Ted and Martha Stere were the most hilarious. He was a tall, lean cowboy type, every inch, you know, the Hollywood idea of a cowboy. And his wife was a stunning woman, absolutely stunning, and a rich contralto voice. She could have been on the stage. And she really was the whole thing. She could run it, but he was, I'm afraid, kind of crooked. And he ran up

bills and this, that and the other thing. And he had nude swimming parties in the pool. And, oh, it got to be pretty wild. So finally Jack said, well, I'm going to go down and run that place. I don't know about you, but it's not going to work unless we go down there. So very reluctantly, I said, well, I'll come along, but I certainly don't want to become involved in anyway with the operation of this guest ranch. Well, my husband had been in the travel business for a number of years. He started in 1933. And this being after the war, the travel business was picking up again. And, of course, he was back into that. So we just barely got the family moved down here and he had to go to New York and he had to go hither and yon working on the travel business. And you know who was left with the guest ranch. And trucks would drive in and asking how many cans of apple juice and tomatoes that I wanted. And because I knew nothing about anything, I would have to give them an order, you know, and the word got around and all the wholesalers would have fleets of trucks coming down the White Sun exit. You name it and I would give everybody an order of some sort or other. (laughter) Terrible! But by degrees, it became a challenge, of course, and I felt,

well, we've got to get on top of this thing. And then, of course, the people that came were absolutely fascinating. The guests, and you just do everything to make it go. You know, patch it together at least, and so on and so forth, but pretty soon I became enthused about the guest ranch business. I played the accordion and the piano and so on. So you'd rush out and cook breakfast and set the table and pretend you were the hostess. And then while they were visiting, you'd rush out and make the pants and come back. And, you know, do everything. And it became just an entrancing business. Now all of this had nothing to do with the outside world because it was so totally an absorbing project that you really didn't know anything else that was going on. And Palm Desert was black at night. You could look there and there would be one or two twinkling lights maybe. But I really wasn't aware of anything else. I had these young kids to take care of and get to school in the morning and problems with the White Sun and so Jack said one day, "How would you like to go back to Connecticut?" Well, by that time, the guests knew me pretty well, and they took Jack aside and they said, "You know, Helen really doesn't want to leave this desert." I was too stubborn

to say anything like that, of course. So Jack gave up the idea of moving back east. And by this time he was building up Seata, which was his travel business. And he decided to move his travel headquarters here from New York. This was in 1959. It was booming again. He's really a terrific business operator. So then he built more units and everything he built was with the idea of eventually turning it into guest units, you see. He had a print shop for the travel thing. We printed folders and a newsletter and all kinds of stuff. We had computers. We had a mailing department and all of us in these, I can show you where the rooms are, was tucked away under the grapefruit trees back here. And it was a worldwide thing. We had offices all around the world and we'd bring our foreign managers here and it just worked out beautifully because you could bring the world to the White Sun and combine the travel thing with the guest ranch thing. And the guest ranch people might get involved with the travel thing. So it was really a world in itself and all of this business activity, of course, created a big post office up here. It was just a little shack on the side of the road. So at that time, I don't know if the Greenleafs were still alive, though Laura

Greenleaf, she may still be alive. But Sid Greenleaf was the postmaster at that time. And very crowded, of course, this little community of Ranch Mirage and becoming a postmaster of a big booming post office all of a sudden, you know, from nothing. So he finally twisted my arm. He said, "Helen, they really need you in the Chamber of Commerce. You ought to get in." I said, "I don't have any time for that sort of thing. It's absolutely out of the question." He said, "Well, we'll have our organizational meeting at the White Sun." So they came down and they got us involved. So I became secretary of the Chamber, and I think that was nineteen, and well in the sixties, somewhere around in there, sixty-one or sixty-two. So then, of course, I became aware of the community, and we got a manager here to run the Sy Slocum, who was fabulous. Sy Slocum and his wife True. They started in, I think it was the fall of sixty. So that I did have time and we bought a home in Palm Desert, and started to live almost people, you know. (laughter) Ordinary lives. And I began to get excited about, you know, you develop civic pride and all of that sort of thing. And Rancho Mirage had an identity and Palm Desert, of course, by this time was a big booming mushroom over

there. And they were really growing fast, but in an entirely different way. The communities are very different, and there was an intense rivalry. And you will discover this, I'm sure, or have discovered it already. (laughter) This was before incorporation and there were terrible battles about whose property was this and which boundary and all of this is Palm Desert. Oh, no, no. I suppose that's true in all communities. At any rate, the Chamber of Commerce had to have a reason for being. And at this point I had become involved in the environmental movement. And was very much interested in Magnesia Falls Canyon up here. And I wanted desperately to see something happen to preserve that. Of course, we took our guests on outings up to Joshua Tree and hikes up in the canyons and saw the big horn sheep. And it just seemed like such a beautiful area, and I thought why not try to do something about making that into a preserve or wildlife or something or other. So we worked very hard on that and then I think at about the same time Marian Henderson started her desert beautiful organization. Have you interviewed Marian?

Y: I'm about to.

D: Yes. And you give her my best, too. And so I became

involved in that. I mean, all these things tied together. I mean, desert beautiful was a specific cleanup sort of thing, beautification, but still had a lot to do with the environment. And I tried to make them aware of the need for recycling this junk that they're picking up instead of just taking junk and throwing it there. So they started quite an energetic recycling project with the handicapped people, the Lou Keener Centers. Is he still alive?

Y: Oh, very much so.

D: Good. Is he still in Palm Desert?

Y: Yes.

D: Yes. I mean it all tied together. So we had an aluminum collection and glass, and I organized all the kids and business people would donate their trucks and that gained momentum in the sixties. And then a very important person in this whole thing is Lloyd Tevis who is a very good friend of ours, and of course a very staunch environmentalist. And he got me involved in the living desert thing, the formation of that. I'm sure you're going to go into that or have done so already. Have you talked to Karen up there?

Y: That's another area I was waiting on because I have a class at College of the Desert and was doing some interviewing

and I wanted to set that aside as one of the projects.

But it turns out they're going to do it, so I'm going to

D: Yes. Well, of course, we were living on Old Prospector Trail in Palm Desert on the same street with Rambo and

Henderson and Rambo Henderson was, of course, a giant of a man, tremendous person. Really a very wonderful American. Have you read any of his books about the desert and whatever that one is? It's a beautiful book. Well, he was a magnificent person. And at this point I got involved in the Desert Protective Council with Henry Weber from La Quinta. And eventually I became president of that, the Desert DBC for a brief period. But I don't know, we've gotten off the track so many times. You better start asking me questions.

Y: Let's see. JoAnn said that I should ask you about the clientele you had here. She said it was a unique family guest ranch and that the clientele really brought, or the ranch brought people from all over the country, all over the world actually, you said, so that it was like presidents such as Eisenhower making the area famous. That the people who came here made this area famous as well so that the ranch had a lot to do.

D: Well, the ranch had a house right now, up to this very moment, a very distinctive unique appeal which I've never really been able to put my finger on it, but Jack, as I said was a New Yorker. And people would come here. He was raised in the streets, you know, just straight out of New York. And people would come here and they would say, this is the most western guest ranch we have ever been into. You know, and they would go on and on and it just tickled me no end, of course. (laughter) Because neither one of us is a westerner. But he has a gift, really, for knowing what to do with a place. And in the field of recreation, he really is a genius. Of course, he worked on the . . . he had these tours all over the world which were tremendously successful. They were student tours originally, educationally oriented. And some of that, I think, went into this and he just has tremendous imagination. And he was never done, you see, whatever came in just went back into the ranch. It was always plowed in and we were always just having a terrible time. The idea of the ranch originally in forty-six when of the travel, of course, was in such a terrible fuss with the war, he said, well, we're going to have to have something that will survive wars and crises and so on. A hotel certainly is something

that goes on forever no matter what. And this hotel will support our travel business and we can have scholarships for students and on and on and on. Well, of course, it was just on the other shoe. The ranch took everything out of SETA and SETA supported the ranch. It never would have existed without the travel business where all the money was coming in. And so we'd just go in and need a tennis court or a golf course (chuckle), but finally, of course, in the end it now supports itself very, very well indeed. But the people who came either liked it very much or they didn't like it at all. And when I was running it, and I wouldn't know how to handle the situation. Someone would come in who obviously didn't fit. See, we ate at family tables; it was all family style. It was very intimate, really. And everything was on a first-name basis. And someone would come in with ten suitcases all dressed to the hilt and obviously didn't belong here, and I would think, well, I'll have to tell them to leave. So if I was just controlled and waited, say, six hours or maybe twelve hours, they would come to the desk and say that they had a sick aunt someplace and they just had to go. Oh, I was so sorry. They would take themselves out of here, actually. I mean, they simply

didn't belong and they felt this. It was an instinctive thing. So, oh, we just had wonderful people here. We had the other people and you name it, but they left their identify somewhere else and when they came here they could just totally relax. And they just adored it. I just ran into a couple, Dr. Alex Gerber and his wife, who have been coming down for twenty-five years. They're having a family reunion of three or four generations, and they sent invitations to everybody and invited them all. They want to meet in Hawaii or Alaska or the Bahamas or whatever, White Sun was the only place they would consider. So here they are, all convening tomorrow and it just gets into their systems. It's into the third generation. These little babies that have been brought down here or conceived here or whatever and now have their families. And they're coming back. I can't explain it to you, Pat. It just kind of happens, but it's an island. They just come down and they all keep saying, please don't sell the White Sun. Where will we ever go? Well, it was oriented to families. And there was spaces, oh, lots of space and there's let's see about four swimming pools. So they never have the feeling that there's a mob. Up until last year, we always had horses, and there was space out there, and

you could go out to the moonlight rides in the dunes and backless rides. And they could come in and never lock a door and never have to think about the kids and they'd go off and they had total freedom, which presses the Danes, the Peter Dane family from Beverly Hills. This should be confidential. Just cut it off.

Y: All right.

D: And then I think one of the funny stories was about Perry, is it Perry Mason that does these mystery things on the television?

Y: Ironside. Do you mean the character Perry Mason?

D: No, yes, no, is it Perry Mason?

Y: Yes. Perry Mason was the old show about the lawyer who was always solving mysteries.

D: Yes. Well, at that time I didn't know anything about television, and this name didn't ring any bell with me. And we got a phone call from their offices and Hollywood and they wanted to shoot a scene down here. And I was very much against it. I said, I don't know anything about this outfit. Well, somebody heard me say Perry Mason and oh, Helen, is it Perry Mason? And I said, TV. So we wouldn't bother any of the guests and it won't take very

much time and so on and so forth. And we'll pay for everything and you know, props or whatever. So finally I said, well, at such and such a time we wouldn't be too busy on this day and they could come down and use a corner of the golf course or something or other. So they came and, of course, all the maids stopped working. They were all craning their necks and I was rushing around telling them, what's the matter with you guys? Get back there, do your thing. I never thought anymore about it. And about six or eight months, or maybe as much as a year later because it takes a long time for these things to get around to being finished, somebody came back from Bangkok and said, "Gee, that was really neat when Perry Mason went to the White Sun." I said, "What?" (laughter) Yes, we were seeing it over there in Bangkok and they showed the frame, the entrance to the ranch. And then, of course, it was some set somewhere or other. And they said, "We don't remember the bar looking like that." I said, "Well, that wasn't the bar at all. That was some other place." Of course, we got fantastic publicity out of this little few minute thing. And, well, I was that blind, you see. Meant nothing to me. But at any rate, we try to keep people's identity very private. And I think they just all feel like

ordinary human beings, which is very important to them at a certain time in their lives. And another one that was marvelous guest who still comes is Kurt Adler, the director of the San Francisco Opera, who was a very egotistical Viennese. He's close to eighty now, I think. And he would come down with his wife and after the last opera in L. A. and they just would have a lovely, lovely, lovely time. And we had a terrible rain storm like you must have had this year, and at that point we were putting a new roof on one section of the building. And we were upstairs in our bedroom and leaks were coming in everywhere. So Jack was trying to organize it so there would just be one leak instead of a million pots and buckets around, you know. We had a big tub. And he had a broom handle and this Kurt Adler opened the door and came up to ask us something. Jack just plunged the broom handle in the ceiling and this great gushing Niagara came down. And Kurt was standing out there in the rain just speechless and he turned around and he said, "Every day I learn something new." (laughter) And he walked out into the night. But, you know, things like that, people just love it. That's so idiotic. It's not exactly a Hilton hotel arrangement. And then everybody gets involved. We had

Christmases where they all came down and they'd decorate the lobby and then we'd go Christmas caroling. Some people had never done anything like that. This was a tradition in my family and we always went Christmas caroling. So one day we went over to somebody's house in Palm Desert, I think. We'd promised them that we'd come carol and no one was home. They were all gone except a black man who was dumping garbage. And he had both his arms full of garbage, cans and bags of things, and here four or five cars drove up from the White Sun with all these little children. We had candles and everyone was coached, you know. You creep up quietly and then all of a sudden you start singing. We wish you a merry Christmas, and the guy froze, of course. I mean, where could he go? He couldn't put the garbage down and he couldn't run and they were all singing to this black man with his garbage. (laughter) His face was a picture. It was so wonderful. It was just absolutely marvelous. Of course, he was just undone. (laughter) He was serenaded like that Christmas eve before. So, you know. Lots and lots of fun. So what else do you want to know about the

Y: John was talking about when he was your first bartender.

D: Oh, yes. Lots of people have been bartenders here. John

was an excellent one, very, very good. And Henry Wilcoxon was another one. Of course, we didn't have a liquor license for it. We just had a bottle bar. And we had little cupboards and guests would bring their bottles and just stash them in there. And Biff Wilcoxon was, I don't know if you remember the old DeMille extravaganzas, Roman pictures, and he was always some big shot. Well, anyhow, he would come down and the White Sun was his stage set. And when he was a bartender, you know, it was just like a scene out of a show and some lady came in off the street and wanted a drink. Nobody said anything. And Biff leaned over, he was very handsome, gorgeous with turquoise jewels and turquoise hair on his wrists and bells and he asked, crossing his arms, leaned over and said, "What would you like?" And the lady needed some drink that we, of course, nobody had this drink. And he said, "Well, ma'am, we're just fresh out of that." And he offered something else that we did have, which she had never heard of. Of course, he conned her into having a drink of this, and so she had a drink. Then when she was through she put a couple of dollars on the counter, and he pushed it like he couldn't take it. "I couldn't take it." Now the next time you're having trouble with a flat tire or something and someone helps you, give it to the guy who

fixes your flat tire." (laughter) And she went out of there. What a crazy bar! But the bar's a wonderful place. It's a teeny tiny little bar, and so many times we would say, oh, we've got to enlarge this bar. Oh, no, they wouldn't have it. They wanted it standing on top of each other, this bar.

Y: Was it private or public?

D: Well, of course, eventually we got a license and then it was public. But at that point it was just a bottle bar. No, we never been a closed club here. We've always been open to the public. Anybody and everybody would come in. Now, of course, because of the connections with the travel thing, we have people from everywhere under the sun.

Y: Tell me more about that. You were mentioning SITA before.

D: Well, SITA which stood for the Students International Travel Association became a worldwide travel organization like American Express and so on. And as I say, we had foreign managers in each country, a Chinaman from Hong Kong, and a Thai from Bangkok and an Indian from New Delhi and would have our managers here at least once a year for general meetings and, of course, they just thought the ranch was unbelievable. And it's very hard to get them to go back to their countries because things weren't quite

the same in Tokyo and so forth. And then we decided for the opening of the ranch every year to use a foreign festival theme because I mean, after all, we had all of the wherewithal. We had the airlines and the tourist offices, all of them would pitch in and help and we'd do Bavarian beerfests, Oktoberfests. One year we did a Viking festival or Chinese festival, lanterns and you know the possibilities were endless and we'd research it all year. And the food and the decor and the entertainment, everything was authentic down to the last . . . and the foreign ambassadors were invited. And, oh, it was really very exciting! But that was for the guests and the SITA people and it really wasn't open to the community, although we would get the media in. Is Evelyn Young still living?

Y: Yes.

D: Well, she's been to some of those, and Dorothy Watson, why I guess died.

Y: I don't know.

D: Yes, as preassessor Dorothy Watson used to cover them. Lots of fun. Well, now what else would you like to know about?

Y: John was mentioning that you often provided some of the

entertainment.

D: Yes, I did a lot of music. I was raised in a music educator's family and my father was professor of music education at Columbia in New York. And we all had to play piano and play a chair music instrument. And after we mastered those, we could play what we wanted to play. And I played piano and double bass and clarinet and eventually learned to play the accordion which I took along on these tours. And, of course, the accordion is the greatest thing under the sun because it's a complete orchestra. And if you can't sing at all, you can always sing with an accordion. (laughter) It makes so much noise. And it's wonderful for folk dancing and I love folk music. So we would do lots of folk songs and then Johnny Boyle became very much a part of the White Sun. Have you talked to Tani?

Y: No, I don't know anything about her.

D: Well, you'll have to . . . Johnny Boyle is the Palm Springs institution who goes back to the very early days of the Desert Inn.

Y: Boyle, B-O-

D: B-O-Y-L-E, an old Irish name. He was, well, he really was Hollywood material, but he hated Hollywood with a passion, and he just thoroughly enjoyed organizing these

breakfast rides. And they'd go out into the canyons in the early morning. And he had a marvelous rich baritone voice and he married a little Hawaiian girl, Tani, who I'm sure still lives in Palm Springs. I'm pretty sure, Mrs. Tani, T-A-N-I, Boyle, B-O-Y-L-E. You ought to look her up. And people, all the oldtimers in Palm Springs just loved Johnny Boyle, the Desert Riders. He always sang for them. And he became an institution here at the White Sun. And he would come out. First we did chuck-wagon breakfasts when Desert Aire was still here. Our neighbor, Hank Gogerty, owned the Desert Aire and now, of course, it's become a Marriott deal, I guess. And they'd have these long tables and everybody would come out and have blueberry pancakes and the works, delicious. And many celebrities would come to those breakfasts. I remember when he started singing, "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," and who's the fellow that sang that originally? The little, short tenor. And Johnny did them all, you know. Then he just pick them out of the crowd. I wonder if that little shrimp over there could do something with this song, you know. Of course, they would stand up and then just knock everybody out. And Edgar Bergen and Candy, they used to come to that. She'd climb up in the tree.

There was a row of tamarsk trees and the kids would all sit up in the tamarsk trees. That was lots of fun. And then he always came here for our steak fries on Saturday night and sang. I guess he just passed away a year or so ago. But he's a tremendous institution. You need to devote several chapters to him. That's not the one about the music. There's an issue of that about the White Sun musicians and there's a considerable amount about Johnny Boyle in that. I'll have to find you a copy of that.

No, that's not in there. Oh, yes, we had wonderful music. And then, of course, Kurt Adler, whom I already mentioned, the opera, the man from San Francisco. He used to bring, he brought Elisabeth Schwarzkopf down, the great opera singer, and a number of his orchestra people would come. And then sometimes they'd have little sessions, you know, in the lobby or out in the woods someplace.

(laughter) And there was always something happening. Oh, it's always been a marvelous fun place. And Dottie Newman, who was a character actress from Hollywood. She has been here many, many times. And we'd prevail upon her to sing occasionally. She was a comedienne, marvelous comedienne. Who else? But it's not so much the celebrities. It's just everybody that has made the place. They all fit

in and they'd come back and they'd, you know, they'd just know each other and have a lovely time.

Y: That's important.

D: Yes. You bet.

Y: How did your husband come upon the design of . . .

D: The original building was there, and I can't really explain it to you unless we go over there to the lobby. There was an original ranch house, and he simply enlarged and enlarged it instead of tearing everything down to the ground which we often thought in later years we should have done because it cost so much to reorganize the thing. It just kind of grew like Topsy which I think has given it its character. That was there and then there were little buildings, little outhouse and little shack, sort of. You see, it was a school when Rogers had it for asthenetic children. And so we used some of them; we didn't use them all. And there was an old barn. I don't know. He just had it in his head. I don't know where he gets his ideas from. They just come. But he maintained the original ranch style in all of the new buildings so that it's harmonious.

Y: Do you know very much about the Eleven Mile Ranch?

D: Well, just that I went to Riverside and dug out all the

records and poured over all the stuff. All the facts are there, everything that I could dig up about it. I don't think there's anything more that I can add to that information.

Y: There was one paragraph, you remember looking over this before that I wasn't real sure what had happened. You talked about the Egyptian, the and Realty Company.

D: Yes.

Y: Putting up that Egyptian.

D: Well, that was a dream and, of course, they never did get around to it. That was one of our collapses in this country. Twenty-nine.

Y: Who told you about that?

D: Gee, I don't know if that was Cameron that told me about that. See, Jim Cameron was here, too, with the developer and he was very, very energetic fellow. And his wife, I don't know if she's still alive or not.

Y: What's her first name? Are they associated with Don Cameron?

D: Don, it's not Jim, it's Don Cameron.

Y: Okay.

D: Isabell is the wife. Is she still alive?

Y: I don't think I (phone rang)

D: Oh, that's too bad.

Y: We were talking about the Eleven Mile Ranch. Oh, no, we weren't. We'd gone past that. I was asking you the sentence in here, in the thirties land developers, ~~to the~~ Lawrence

D: I think it's Mackimer.

Y: Mackimer.

D: I think that's where the accent is.

Y: Okay. And Mack Blankenhorn.

D: Yes.

Y: Creator of Smoketree Ranch.

D: Yes. Well, now, his wife is I think, still at Smoketree. I interviewed her a couple of years ago. A very alert lady, very sharp, and she gave me that information.

Y: What I didn't understand was, it says, let's see, one day in April 1935, it says, taking outside the tract office overlooking the wide expanse of open desert, Ruth Wheeler, who would shortly become Mrs. Blankenhorn, came up with a name for the new development, Rancho Mirage.

D: Yes. What didn't you understand about that?

Y: Did this development actually take off?

D: Nothing took off. Nothing. Rancho Mirage just pattered

along and pattered along until Lloyd Tevis, really, who was the basic one who got it incorporated. They have a great deal to be grateful to Tevis for. I mean, he's really done an awful lot of scholarly work down here. And he got the thing organized and he had excellent connections and so on and so forth. I always feel a void when I'm in doubt about something. And he's a thoroughly competent person, so you ought to see him, by all means.

Y: I have.

D: Oh, you have.

Y: Yes.

D: Recently?

Y: Yes. Yesterday.

D: Oh, really! Gosh, you've been busy.

Y: Seems like it's been my Rancho Mirage week.

D: Oh, I think he's a terrific person! I admire Lloyd very much. Is he still enthused about business of politics and government or is he going to get out of it?

Y: He didn't express any joy.

D: Or he didn't say.

Y: No.

D: Yes. Well, I wondered how long he would stick with it. Anyhow, I think he's been a wonderful person here. He

understands what's important in the desert. So many people don't and have abused it and really they're destroying it in a very large fast hurry for profit.

Y: What do you feel . . .

Y: One of the things that the Historical Society is interested in is how the community has changed, particularly in terms of sense of community, community spirit. Do you feel, when you first came in the forties, that it was different from . . .

D: Oh, entirely different. Yes, everybody was struggling to survive, and everybody pretty much helped everybody else. And it's just dog and cat stuff now as far as I can see. Greed and climbing and pushing and shoving and I think it's ugly. I have that feeling, you know, that . . . of course, I've been out of it now since, oh, at least six or seven years so I can't really speak first-hand. But that's the way . . . you know, anything that grows up and gets big and millions and gillions of people, that's too bad in a sense so I guess that's what happens to every place. It's getting, it's, you know, it's an urban community now and it was very rural. (laughter) in those days.

Y: Do you think that had anything to do with the fact that the three towns in the cove area were incorporated separately?

D: Oh, well, they never could have done anything else. There were, you know, distinct individual people in each area and they were oriented to different things. I think Palm Desert has always been oriented to the real estate business. And this is sort of a ranching community, you know, dates and stuff down Clancey Lane and so on and so forth. And a very different emphasis on what they were doing. And it had older roots than Palm Desert. Went back a lot further. Oh, not an awful lot further, but, sure, there were intense jealousies and all kinds of ugly business with that incorporation. And that was really sad, but I guess that's the way it is. The way it went.

Y: Yes. This Blankenhorn's development, where was that, up in the cove?

D: Read that back again, that business.

Y: The Magnesia Falls cove area with its protected had strong appeal so one day they picketed outside the tract office. That's how they named it Rancho Mirage looking out.

D: Does it say what tract office?

Y: No.

D: I wonder if that was Don Cameron or not. I think Cameron was a salesman for this outfit. And this was somebody that was also involved with Laguna Beach or Laguna Bay or whatever. What's the name of that place over there? There's Laguna and there's Laguna Beach.

Y: Laguna Niguel?

D: And, no, it's older than that. Anyhow, they were involved with that real estate development and with this one over here with Rancho Mirage which never, nothing very much ever happened to it. I mean, it was very slow. They did that upper part at the crescent that's up above, built the highway, you know, in the Magnesia Falls Canyon area. And then nothing much happened down below here. And this is all fairly recent, this tremendous boom. Of course, Gogerty showed the Desert Aire and that became this, and then these things, developments, started on Rio Del Sol which has become Bob Hope Drive. That's all fairly recent since we bought this area. And, boy, it's nothing can stop it now, I guess.

Y: Really changed things since you've been living here.

D: Tremendous changes. Every time I come back here, I can hardly find my way around.

Y: I think this is interesting if you can elaborate on how the ranch was named.

D: Oh, yes. Well, as I say, we had these work parties and we were very shorthanded for labor. And people would come down on weekends and race those big railroad ties in the lobby and we wanted to get a good . . . I don't know why we never considered continuing its original name, the Eleven Mile Ranch. I don't think we ever considered that. We just decided, you know, you're starting a new project, you've got to have a new name. So Jack made a long list of all the names that he could think of in the desert that described the desert. And he thought that desert and palm had been overdone, to say the least. And of all these various combinations, that's what the vote was for, White Sun, which exemplified, you know, this intense, brilliant, wonderful light that exists here in the desert. And it was something new and different. But that's how the name came about.

Y: Lloyd Tevis was talking about a mine up in Magnesia Falls. Do you remember?

D: Oh, yes. There's something that looks a little bit like turquoise. I forget what the name of the stuff is, but that's not what they were after. I think they were all

after gold or something important like that. And for a long time we could hike up and find traces of it. I don't know whether they still exist there or not now. I don't know. Those people tramping over hither and yon.

Y: Enough people to do it. Can you talk about . . .

D: But there were jockey trails, you know. The miners had their, carted out their ore and all those things. Lloyd knows where all these things are. If you want to get out and get some heavy boots on and walk pretty early in the morning. Oh, I have to tell you one funny story about the big horn sheep. We decided that the Desert Protective Council here in the desert was very concerned about this endangered species thing, big horn sheep. And they were trying to get the supervisors in Riverside interested. So I invited the superintendent or whatever, I forgot, the big shot over there, Bob Anderson. He's long gone, I guess. And some of the higher ups to come over here early one morning. And I said I would take them up Magnesia Falls Canyon. Possibly we would see some big horn sheep, and I wanted to talk to them about my project of making a park up there, preserving that beautiful canyon. And this was in June, I think. We went up early in the morning and we were well equipped with binoculars

and everything. And we rounded the bend and there were seven big horn sheep, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, right there. And Lloyd Tevis was with me, too. Well, of course, later on they said they said, you had them in a box. You had them in a box. (laughter) They wouldn't believe it was real. And they just took off. This is a very . . . I don't know if you've been up this canyon. It's a rock face. It's quite steep. And one of the gentlemen was very heavy, very stout. Well, up this rock. Of course, sheep vanished in no time at all. And I had a camera with me, and I was so excited and so undone. I got a photograph of the bottom of the man in the bottom and nothing in here. Oh, gosh, I mean, I didn't even . . . I'm still mad about that! (laughter) So furious! But they saw the sheep. By gun, they saw them. They didn't create the canyon, but they did begin to think about it, I guess, a little bit. I think that's all been solved now. I think Fish and Game has finally gotten it, which was where it should have been anyhow. Oh, we worked on that for years.

Y: Sometimes it seems to take that. Can you talk a little bit about raising children here, particularly in the forties. I imagine there weren't that many people around.

D: Well, it was tough, you know. They went twenty-five miles each way to school on a bus. And when they got home, there were no little buddies around. But our kids, of course, all had their areas. This one had to sweep the shuffleboard court, and that one had to sweep something. And the tamarsk were always shedding, and I mean, they all had lots of jobs to do and they had to learn about swimming. And they got a very good education here around the ranch. It was tough, I think. But then most of the desert kids, they were, imagine Desert Center, two and a half hours each way by bus. Their whole social life was riding on the bus to school and going home. Then if they stayed afterwards for school sports. Well, I don't know. They went to good schools. John went to Stanford and graduated magna cum laude. And David went to Middleberry in Vermont and he transferred to Berkeley. And Nancy went to Mills and did very well there. I mean, it didn't affect their ability to go to a good school.

Y: There were no other children around this area though for them to associate with?

D: No. Nowhere around. Then, of course, Palm Desert . . . John had a friend in Palm Desert, Stan Little. You may know Stan Little and his wife. He's done very well here.

No, they didn't have neighbors to run back and forth with. And, of course, they were required to do square dancing on Saturday night with guests, which they thought was a terrible chore. (laughter) But, put on western shirts and do their thing. And Laurie, our middle girl, took over the business. She was the horsey one, and she organized the Easter horse shows. And she just loved to take people out riding, so on and so forth. It was an interesting life for them. But difficult, too, inasmuch as my emphasis had to be and being sure always who of the number one person/was the guest. And the kids, you know, had to wait sometimes. And the little ones, they, often they'd get right between me and the guests and just stand there until I could have wrung their necks right off to try to get my attention, you know. So it wasn't too easy for them, I don't think. We had six. The last one was born here and raised by the guests more or less, Lisa. But there are great values.

Y: Where did they go to school, Indio?

D: Coachella. We were over the line. We were over the school line, which is Bob Hope Drive, then called Rio Del Sol, was the boundary between Indio and the Palm Springs schools. See, there was no high school and I guess there

still is no high school in Palm Desert. So they had to go all the way to Coachella High School which is a very long way. And the elementary school was the Palm Desert Elementary School. So it was a long trip. And then later they built the Indio High School. And then the two younger ones graduated from Indio High School. They went through the public schools here. Yes, I was very concerned about that at first. I thought they would suffer mightily. But, I don't know. I think public schools aren't too bad. They're not the most sensational ones in the world, but they had some excellent teachers at Coachella. And, of course, they'd had expeditions out into the desert and they learned about the creepy crawly things. David is a scientist, our oldest son. He's a medical technologist. And he'll never forget his wonderful desert days. It meant an awful lot to David. Oh, it depends on the parents, I think, and their attitude. Wherever you are in the world, if you have a good home base, it's going to work. Do you have a family?

Y: No, not of my own.

D: Not of your own.

Y: Only a husband.

D: Well, some day maybe.

Y: Yes, we're talking about it.

D: Well, I hope so.

Y: Is there anything else we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

D: Oh, I don't know. I think you've got plenty there.

Y: Well, I'd sure like to get it on tape because no one else but you can talk about it in essence. (laughter)

D: Well, I've urged you looking up Mrs. Boyle, see if she's around. They have three children, so one of them is a son. I think, Bobby, and two daughters, Linda and I don't know what their last names are. And she was connected with the Palm Valley School so she could fill you in on that. That's another development that should be considered. Is that still going?

Y: Oh, definitely.

D: Okay. Well, that was a real struggle to keep that thing afloat. So Tani, she's a very, very lovely person. And you've seen just about everybody else I've mentioned.

Y: Or getting around to it.

D: You're doing awfully well, I'd say.

Y: Well, we hope to really be able to cover the history so that it's fairly complete and recordable.

D: Now, are you going to sort of edit it and put it all

together? That's your job?

Y: One of the things that . . .

(Mumbling in background)

D: They designed the corral so that they . . . oh, Tony!

What are you doing back here?

T: Well, I'm just . . .

D: Glad to see you, Tony.

T: Looking in the paper here and maybe I will find a picture
in there or something.

D: Good.

T: Yes.

D: No horses back here for you to ride.

T: By golly

D: Pat Young. Tony is a wrangler from way back here at the
White Sun.

T: Hi, how are you?

Y: Hello.

T: What's your name again?

D: Pat Young. She's doing, she's taping information on all
these old, on the history of the desert.

T: Oh.

D: She thought the White Sun should get into that. He can't

possibly finish a sentence in less than an hour, so . . .

(laughter)

Y: Well, now what . . .

D: We designed these so that the horses would have shade.

Very often when you put a horse in a corral, in a building or a shed and the wind blows through and they get pneumonia and terrible problems. When they're out in the open like this with shade, why they can, they're in great shape.

In much better condition. We usually kept about fifteen head, and we'd have a donkey or something or other for the kids. And Jack planted grapefruit trees everywhere and we'd use hither and yon for and the guests would help themselves. The grapefruit are all blooming now. It smells so good.

Y: Oh, it smells heavenly!

D: Wonderful. Then they'd ride down here and that was all open desert and they could go out to the sand dunes and have a ball. (More mumbling.) And we'd go across the walk over there. You can see we're surrounded. (birds tweeting) Marriott business.

Y: Oh, that's Rancho Las Palmas right across the way.

D: Yes, but it was all just marvelous view out there, open desert. There's a big pool here. And some of the people

complained about the children and the noise. So we designed another children's swimming pool which I'll show you back there to try to draw them over there.

Y: Did it work?

D: Oh, actually it's been very popular, yes. Little island in the middle and various slides and things. Somebody scare you out there? That's not very pretty. That's strictly illegal; I don't know how he got in there. It's shot.

Y: Now is this . . . the is not built on. Is this property of the White Sun?

D: It's all White Sun, right. It's all part of the White Sun. And the openness of the place is what gives it a lot of charm, of course. It wasn't all squashed in. Most places you can't see the desert at all. Not much desert anymore, it's all wash. Lush green. with fireplaces and none of it is really luxurious, but it's pretty nice. How did what?

Y: The windmill. It seems to be your symbol..

D: Yes, well, guess they had this idea that there had to be a windmill up there. That was a job. (laughter) Getting that up there. That used to be the old water tower there of the original ranch. You know, it would fill up with

water and then it would start pouring down the sides.

And you'd have to run in and turn a switch and vice versa.

That is the core and the original building was there.

And then we had, I'll show you where we had our steak
fries out over here. Jacuzzi bath they're getting into.

Y: Do you still have the steak fries?

D: Oh, yes, every Saturday night. Have to come out to one.
It's really an event.

Y: Sounds like it.

D: All nice. Winter, spring, any time, it's always going on.

Y: Do you close down in the summer?

D: Yes. We're closed from June to October. We tried staying
open in the summer, but it didn't work. They have a big
fire in the pit, and then the barbecue is over here. And
they line up and get their baked potato and green salad,
green apple pie and a big steak. And the entertainer,
cowboy singer or whoever, is up here and sings everybody's
favorite songs. And they just have a lovely time. It's
always worked out very nicely. And people from the
community come to that, too. It's not just guests. We
have a little pitch and putt golf course here.

Y: Has this always been here? Is this part of early?

D: Oh, it's been here for, I don't know, fifteen years at

least. You know, we planted these trees. We planted every tree on this place except that big tamarsk in the middle which goes back to the original homestead. So you get an idea of how old the place is. And then this part here, of the upper story we built for an apartment for the children. They had to live someplace. They lived in a trailer for awhile. See, that's the old tamarsk that goes back to the original homestead. It's quite a tree.

Y: Do you know when it was originally built?

D: Yes. I think the date is in there. It was in the twenties. That's a good sixty years old, that tree. And that's one of the original grapefruits here. It was a grapefruit orchard So this is the house. Let's go in and show you the lobby. And that was one of the original buildings, that one here, that little cottage.

Y: Thank you.

D: Now the original living room was about the size of this red table here. And there was no fireplace. And then there were little bedrooms off it, and then there was . . . you stay out. And the dining room, you can see how this grew. It was that big . . . Sonny, out! And then it was that big. (laughter) And it got bigger and

bigger. I guess you can come into the barn though
you're not allowed into the

: Hello.

D: Hi. Illegal entry of a dog.

: Oh, that's all right.

D: Anyhow, this is where all the action took place in the
good old White Sun bar. This is Johnny Boyle over here.
A wonderful guy. Yes, that's my baby. I'm sorry, but
she's breaking all the rules. Not the dining room,
Sunday. I'm going to put her outdoors. Come on, Sunday.

: She's real friendly, isn't she?

D: She's too friendly. Come on. Stay. He's forgetting
that there are health laws. No dogs in the dining room.
God! They'd close us down, wouldn't they?

: Oh. We'd get excited about something like that.

D: Well, this was the . . . like I said, we enlarged the
dining room all the way out there and then we added on.
This is the redwood room, and when we decided we needed
more dining room, well, then, it went on here. And there
are lots of groups that meet here, the Women's Club and
the Young Republicans and the Old Republicans and I
don't know who all. And the music department at COD
always used to do Christmas carol programs in here because

acoustics are fantastic for some reason or other. Sounds so great.

Y: Do you raise your own dates here?

D: Oh, yes. We planted all the date trees here. What we've done now is a little Mexican family, they take care of the dates. And any dates we want, they let us have them, you know. It's a very nice arrangement. Because you can't pay people to take care of dates. You know all about the date industry, I presume.

Y: Yes.

D: Travel a million miles up and down those terrible ladders. And all the dates. And then, of course, you know how they plant the grapefruit under the date trees and the nice the way they work together. Yes, think of all those little palm trees we planted, the little baby things. We had two rows of these ash trees here, wherever the circles are. And, of course, the roots started carrying up the whole garage so we had to take a bunch of them out. It's sort of below now right after Easter. And then this is the recreation room. We had a fitness class in here last year. But it's nice and warm there. There are lots of groups that come down and we have conferences here.

Y: Oh, you do have conferences here.

D: Yes. Of course, they can't be very big. Well, let's see, we'll peek in here. The area. This is a nice room for various and sundry things. And when there's parties, they can raise the roof here and it doesn't bother anybody.

Y: Did you ever have any competition in the area in terms of guests ranches?

D: Well, in the beginning, in the early days, of course, Smoketree has been a private club ranch. And then there was some X bar something or other across in the Thousand Palms areas, but they all dried up and died so that there is no other place like this. Absolutely none. And people say, well, if I can't get in here, recommend another place like it. No such thing. This is the children's little corral house. Hi. Then we started with one tennis court. And they said that wasn't enough. They wanted lots more. So here they are, the famous family.

: Not me.

D: Go, go, go.

: I'm going to take a nap, that's what I'm going to do.

D: Cooler weather's nice now.

: Yes.

D: It was too hot earlier.

: Yes. Nice.

D: Oh, look at his style. It's really . . .

: He has a pretty good style for an old guy.

D: Marvelous. This is the children's pool area. The way it worked out, the parents like this, too. They come over here and they sit in that little shaded area and have their drink or whatever. Or they can play tennis and keep an eye on what's going on in here. You like that chlorine, Sunday?

Y: Is that a drinking fountain in the middle?

D: No, they can sit on that. It's wonderful. And they can squirt the water hither and yon and just have fun. They're all different depths, you see. For wading or deep swimming or whatever. So there are four pools. One's inside that complex there, too.

Too bad we can't have the horses anymore. I'm just sad about that. Well, now it's five courts. They would like to have twice as many. And there is room over there for more. We'll put in some more eventually. But this used to be where we had the horse show with the big field and all that stuff. I think that's pretty well covered it, Pat.

Y: Okay.

D: If you have more questions, you know where to come.

Y: That's true.

D: You and your husband should come out and have a steak fry.

Y: Well, that sounds good. On a Saturday night?

D: Well, you call up Kathleen and tell her you're my guest and you can just come and enjoy it.

Y: Oh, well, that's very nice. Thank you.

D: Because it really is fun. Well, I wish you lots of luck.